Captain William Kennedy

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Captain William Kennedy

William Kennedy, arctic explorer, political agitator, missionary and entrepreneur, played a small but important part in the early movement for Canada's westward expansion. In 1857 he arrived at the Red River Settlement to garner local support for Canada's annexation of the Hudson's Bay Company's territory of Rupert's Land. The campaign failed, but Kennedy eventually returned to the west, where he became a valued member of Red River Society. Through his activities as a shop owner, stipendiary magistrate and justice of the peace, and as a noted lecturer on the promise of Canada's northern frontier, William Kennedy contributed to the development of his community and province.

The Early Years

William Kennedy was born at Cumberland House on 26 April 1814. He was the son of Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and a Swampy Cree Indian woman known simply as Aggathas, Mary or "Mary Bear". William's childhood abounded with the influence of traders, hunters and explorers, the most notable of which was Captain John Franklin. In 1819-20 Captain Franklin wintered at Cumberland House, teaching "little Billy" his daily lessons.

A number of HBC officers encouraged their half breed or "country born" children to become more fully assimilated into the British, Protestant world of their forefathers. Education was one of the main routes to that goal and Alexander Kennedy, like some of his colleagues, sent most of his sons to Scotland to complete their studies. William's schooling began in 1825 on the Orkney Islands and included studies in Latin, French, Math and Geography. He is said to have excelled at school and by 1831 was considering a career in medicine, when the death of his father intervened. William Smith, secretary of the HBC and executor of Alexander's will, informed Kennedy that funds for his continued education were not available and advised that he pursue a career with the HBC.

Smith found an opening for William with the HBC in Montreal, and after signing a contract as Apprentice Clerk, the young Kennedy left for Quebec in March 1833. He spent the next five years at Fort Coulonge in the Ottawa Valley, where he became fluent in French. In 1838 he was transferred to Ungava (Labrador), and over a seven year period served at all four of the Company's posts: Fort Smith, Fort Chimo, Fort Nascopie and Fort Siveright.

During this period, it became increasingly difficult for the half breed employees of the HBC to attain promotions past the level of Post Master. Kennedy proved to be one of the exceptions to this rule. In 1841 he was promoted to Clerk and, a year later, HBC governor George Simpson arranged to have his pay increased. Not only had he improved his position, his cordial relationship with Simpson also suggests that he was fast becoming one of the governor's favourites. Within two years, however, Kennedy's temperance convictions were to bring him into conflict with the company over their policy of selling liquor to the Indians. In 1843, unable to reconcile his personal principles with HBC practises, he decided to quit the company's service.

Kennedy finally left the HBC in 1846, and went to Kingston, Upper Canada where he established himself in business. He later decided to return to Ungava and attempted to persuade Simpson to arrange for the Hudson's Bay Company to lend

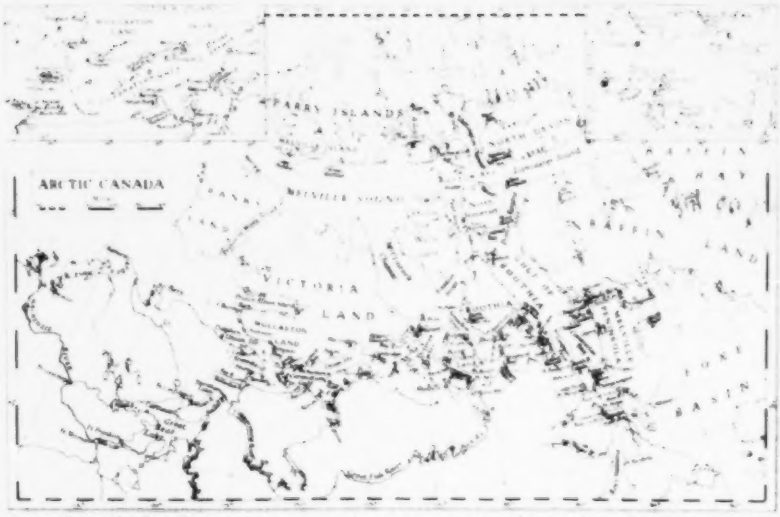
him 2000 pounds sterling to start a trading business. He planned to set up a salmon and porpoise fishery and export the cured fish and porpoise oil to England. He also hoped to compete with the Moravian settlements for any "Esquimaux" trade not being done by the HBC. In return, he promised not to interfere in the company's trade with the Indians, but Simpson refused to endorse the plan and Kennedy was denied the loan.

The refusal prompted Kennedy to combine forces with his nephew, Alexander Kennedy Isbister, in a campaign against the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly. Kennedy attacked the HBC with great vigour, inspiring various Canadian newspapers to print articles which took issue with the company's extensive powers. In the fall of 1848, he wrote to Lord Elgin, Governor General of Canada, denouncing HBC activities in Ungava, and excerpts of the letter were printed by George Brown in the Toronto *Globe*, as part of a campaign to have Canada annex the Northwest. Kennedy's accusations appeared to undermine the company's position, but Simpson rebutted the charges in the *Montreal Courier* and sent Elgin copies of the correspondence that had passed between the young entrepreneur and himself. The letters, dealing with Kennedy's desire to return to Ungava as an associate of the HBC, destroyed his case.

In the years following the HBC controversy, Kennedy remained active as both an entrepreneur and a mariner. He established a fishery at the mouth of the Saugeen River in 1848, thus becoming one of the founders of Southampton, Canada West. Between 1848 and 1850, he worked as the captain of a boat on Lake Huron, but in 1851 he gave up his position to embark on a new adventure. At the suggestion of ex-Chief Trader John McLean and with the encouragement of A.K. Isbister, Kennedy was chosen by Lady Franklin to lead the second private expedition organized to search for her husband, arctic explorer and Kennedy's one-time tutor, Sir John Franklin.

Kennedy arrived in England in 1851, six years after the explorer's disappearance. Franklin had left England in May 1845 in search of a North West passage linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. His two ships, the *Erebus* and the *Terror* had last been sighted on 26 July of that year. Kennedy quickly organized a crew and had the ship, the *Prince Albert*, outfitted for its spring departure. By 9 September 1851, he and his rescue party had already made a preliminary exploration of Leopold Island, the winter headquarters of an earlier expedition in search of Franklin. The *Prince Albert* eventually settled in to winter at Batty Bay and Kennedy, his second in command and twelve men set out to explore the Boothia Peninsula area.

Kennedy's party trekked to Fury Beach and then on to Brentford Bay where eight of the men were ordered back to the ship. The smaller group went on to discover Bellot Strait, but instead of continuing southwest as they had been instructed, Kennedy and his men moved west. The error, perhaps the result of snow-blindness, led them on to Prince of Wales Island and across the frozen Peel Sound and Franklin Strait. On 30 May they returned safely to the *Prince Albert*, having travelled 1,760 kilometres, the longest sledge journey undertaken to that time. On 28 August 1852, Kennedy sailed from Beechey Island and arrived in Aberdeen, Scotland about forty days later. Although he had failed to find any trace of Franklin,



A map from John Rae, *Rae's Arctic Correspondence, 1844-1855* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1953) shows the Boothia Peninsula and Bellot Strait.

Kennedy brought his crew back to Britain without the loss of a single man.

Lady Franklin attempted to finance another private search under Kennedy's command in 1853-54. The expedition was to approach the Arctic via the Pacific Ocean, but Kennedy was deserted by his crew and forced to lay anchor near Valparaiso, Chile in 1854. He remained in Chile until 1856, utilizing his ship, the *Isabel* in coastal trade until it became obvious that there was no chance of organizing another expedition. In August 1856, Kennedy sailed back to Liverpool.

The Movement for Western Expansion

Kennedy returned to Canada late that year where he became involved in the movement for westward expansion. During 1856 the HBC had asked the British government to renew its exclusive lease to trade in the Northwest, thus creating a storm of protest in Canada. Kennedy, via correspondence with his brother Phillip at Red River, attempted to persuade the inhabitants of the western settlement to petition the Canadian government for annexation. On 26 February 1857, Kennedy arrived in Red River to actively solicit support for the idea of Canada's westward expansion.

The petition Kennedy carried had been drafted in Upper Canada but was found unsuitable for the West. Donald Gunn, one of the HBC's severest critics at Red River, revised the document, and Kennedy began his work. The idea of Canadian annexation appealed to members of the settlement's Scottish community and others with grievances against the HBC. In an attempt to garner more widespread support, Kennedy held a series of private meetings throughout the scattered settlement. At the first of two public meetings, held in the Presbyterian School House in Kildonan, he found considerable backing for the petition, but at the second, held

in a predominantly French area, there was little support and only eighteen signatures were added to the list. Up the Assiniboine River, at the parishes of St. James and St. François-Xavier, no one signed. Of a Red River population of 6,000, only 575 endorsed the petition. The list was headed by Roderick Kennedy and most of the signatures were from the Scottish settlement and the area around the St. Andrew's rapids.

Kennedy's trip to Red River was not undertaken solely for political reasons. Prior to leaving the East he had been involved in the creation of the North-West Trading and Colonization Company (NWTCC), an organization with aspirations to exploit the western market. In his talks with the settlers at Red River, Kennedy emphasized the value of a good communications system with the East and the possibilities that might be created if a railway were built from Lake Superior to Red River. After collecting as many signatures as possible, Kennedy left the settlement by canoe to fulfill the second part of his mission — to trace the best communications route between the head of the Great Lakes and Red River, on behalf of the NWTCC.

Failure to gain a government charter resulted in the disintegration of the NWTCC and the establishment of the North-West Transportation, Navigation and Railway Company. Kennedy became one of the new company's directors and, in 1858, when the organization secured a contract to carry mail to Red River, he was placed in charge of the operation. In June of that year, the first mail packet was shipped out on the steamer, *Rescue*, from Collingwood on Georgian Bay to Fort William and then on to Red River via the Pigeon River and Grand Portage route.

The first delivery contained only fourteen letters and a few newspapers. Although Kennedy and the company promised to deliver mail twice a month in summer and once a month in winter, the inhabitants of Red River never completely trusted the service, and chose instead to send their mail via the United States. The Canadian service, which depended upon the co-operation of the HBC, collapsed when the company's support was withdrawn in 1859, and was finally abandoned in June 1860.

An interesting sidelight to Kennedy's 1857 visit in the West was his meeting with the Saulteaux Indian Chief, Peguis. During the 1850s, when the issue of Indian land rights arose, it was Kennedy whom Peguis empowered to represent native claims before the Select Committee of the House of Commons. Kennedy subsequently turned this authority over to his nephew, A.K. Isbister, because of the latter's background. As a result, Isbister represented the rights of the Indian peoples against the claims of the HBC before the British government.

Kennedy went back to England in 1859 where he married Eleanor Cripps. The couple returned to the Northwest in 1860 with funds collected in England for the establishment of an Indian mission. The mission was located in the Lake of the Woods area and trading was to be an integral part of the work undertaken. Deserted by the Indians they had brought in as guides and workmen, the Kennedys abandoned their post and returned to the Red River Settlement in the winter of 1861. Undaunted by this setback, the couple made plans to re-establish the mission on Lake Manitoba. Their second attempt was thwarted when trade goods failed to arrive, and the Kennedys were once again forced to go back to Red River.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Mrs. Eleanor Kennedy (nee Cripps) was a distinguished personality in her own right. In addition to operating the family store, she taught music at Miss Davis' school, played the organ at St. Andrew's Church and was known as a talented singer.

Since the death of her husband, Alexander Kennedy, William's mother Aggathas had resided at Red River in a small frame cottage on Lot 63 in St. Andrew's parish. After her death in 1863, William and his wife acquired the property and by 1866 were making plans to construct a new home for their family. The house, christened "Maple Grove", was built by Red River stonemason, Duncan McRae.

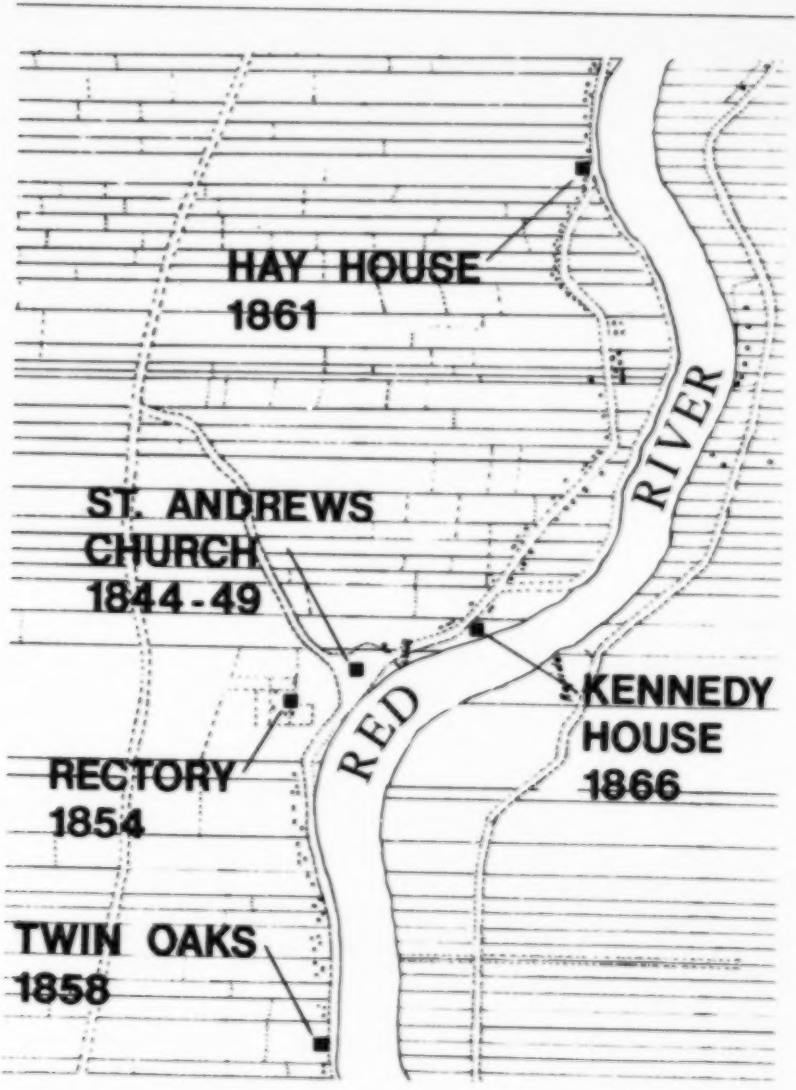
Maple Grove was constructed on a small plot of elevated land situated be-

tween the Red River and River Road. Built of stone quarried from the river banks at St. Andrew's Rapids, the two-storey house was attached to the smaller log home in which the Kennedys had previously resided. In 1920, many years after the family had sold Maple Grove, the log section was dismantled and a two-storey, stone-walled servant's wing was added. Other renovations substantially altered the appearance of the house, concealing most vestiges of the original interior and some exterior features.

Pre-1920 photograph of the Kennedy House showing the earlier log house to the right.

In 1866, the original Kennedy residence was a unique and highly fashionable home. While other structures being built in the area featured the symmetrical proportions and low gable or hip roofs of Georgian architecture, Maple Grove was constructed in the Gothic Revival style. Popular in Eastern Canada in the 1860s, Gothic Revival buildings were characterized by irregular lines, pointed arches and sharply pitched, multi-gabled roofs. Although less ornate than its British or Eastern Canadian counterparts, Maple Grove was fifteen or twenty years ahead of the times by Red River standards.

Over the years, the Kennedy house was frequented by a variety of local personalities. William Kennedy's daughter, Mary, kept a diary during 1882 which contains numerous references to members of the Ross, Sinclair, Christie and Isbister families, who were among those welcomed as guests at Maple Grove. Although the house on River Road certainly seemed too far from town for a young woman like Mary, visits to neighbours and the occasional trip into Winnipeg to shop, visit with friends, attend a concert or an "at home" given by the mistress of Government House seem to have provided some consolation.



A map showing Kennedy House and other structures of historical significance located along River Road.

The Kennedy House on River Road

There were other amenities. The Kennedys were among the first families in the area to acquire a piano, and William's daughter spent many hours practising or receiving singing lessons from her talented mother. Quiet afternoons and evenings would be spent reading books such as William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, sewing, playing cribbage or writing letters to friends whose families were stationed at the farflung posts of the HBC. One such letter, from Mary's friend Emma Christie, contains fond remembrances of Christmas preparations at Maple Grove, where the two young women spent many hours "stoning raisins" and cutting fruit rind for mince meat, Christmas puddings and cakes.

In many respects, the Kennedys' way of life at Maple Grove reflected the influence of William's British, Protestant upbringing. Nevertheless, Kennedy is said to have remained proud of his Indian heritage. Moreover, he continued to maintain close association with other prominent half breed or "country born" families at Red River.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Mary Kennedy

The Later Years

By the 1870s William Kennedy's health had deteriorated to the point where he was confined to his bed with rheumatism for extended periods of time. The family survived on the earnings made from two small import businesses which were operated by the Kennedys and their two children, William and Mary. The Kennedys offered "high class dress goods" and imported foods to their customers, but few could afford the cost of the merchandise. The quality of goods began to diminish and the enterprise eventually faltered. The only consolation were the land deeds

and Métis scrip which the family collected in lieu of cash payments. Apparently, the Kennedys had accumulated some 6880 hectares of land as payment in kind by the time the store closed, but much of it proved to be of little value once the Manitoba land boom ended.

Kennedy's poor health had also prevented him from taking a leading role in the events of the Red River Insurrection of 1869-70. Although the settlers sought his advice, he rarely took part in public debate. The only issue in which he was reported to have taken an active role involved the fate of Louis Riel's prisoners. A letter requesting the release of the interned men and an end to further bloodshed was written by the captain and delivered by Mrs. Kennedy. Apparently, the appeal induced Riel to liberate some of the prisoners, including Canadian Commissioner Donald A. Smith and Colonel de Salaberry.

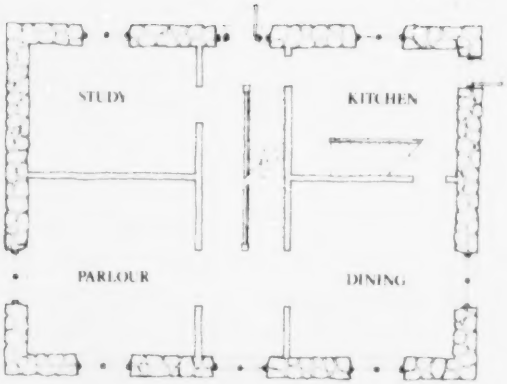
In 1879 at the first meeting of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Captain Kennedy was called upon to address the gathering. He spoke on the north-west passage and the resource wealth of the northern frontier, a topic which had captured his imagination many years before. As his reputation as an authority on the North grew, Kennedy spoke on the subject to audiences as far away as Great Britain. According to the one-time explorer, the future of Canada's northwest lay "by way of Hudson Bay". In his opinion, an overland road linking the western reaches of the country to the bay was the key to the development of the northern frontier. As a result, he became an active supporter of both the Hudson Bay and transcontinental railways and has been cited as the first individual to perceive the commercial value of the northern bay as a port facility.

Despite his frail health, the captain continued to work on behalf of his community. He remained active in temperance groups and in 1879 was appointed stipendiary magistrate for the County of Lisgar. He served in the public courts until 1884 and from 1883 to 1889 functioned as a justice of the peace.

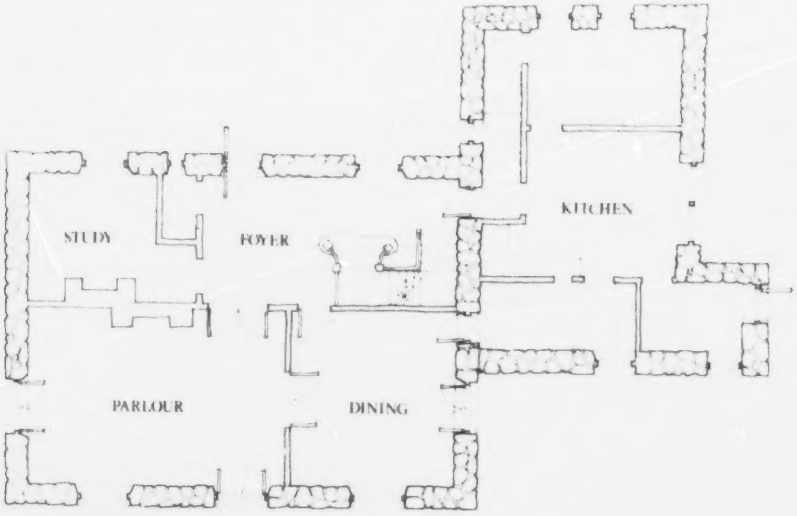
On 25 January 1890, at the age of eighty-five, William Kennedy died and was buried near his home at St. Andrew's churchyard. Whether advocating Canada's western expansion or extolling the potential of her northern frontier, he remained a man with a vision of the future. His life had been dedicated to the possibilities of "tomorrow country", and his role in the development of his community and province was substantial.

The Kennedy House, as it appears today, has changed significantly from its original design. To the two storey rectangular stone house, a large two storey servants' wing, also of stone, was added in 1920. At this time the interior layout was radically altered from a central hall plan to an asymmetrical plan with the stairs rebuilt near the north door of the house. Wall finishes, flooring, trim and mouldings, were all redone. In the 1950s, the creation of a large third storey room changed the roof line on the river front of the house, eliminating the central gable.

After the death of Dr. Edward Shaw, who had purchased the house to create a museum to William Kennedy, the property was acquired in 1983 under the Canada-Manitoba Agreement for Recreation and Conservation on the Red River Corridor (ARC). An enclosed teahouse porch was added to the 1920s wing and the 1920s interior was remodelled.



Floor plan of the Kennedy House, pre-1920.



Floor plan of the Kennedy House following 1920 renovations.

Suggestions for Further Reading

A number of secondary sources on the development of the Red River Settlement contain references to William Kennedy. These include, among others: George Bryce's, *History of Manitoba* (Toronto: Canada History Company, 1906); A.C. Gluek's, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965); Donald Gunn's *History of Manitoba* (Ottawa: MacLean Roger & Co., 1880) and J.J. Hargrave's, *Red River* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1871).

The Provincial Archives of Manitoba contains a number of collections pertaining to the Kennedy family: the *Alexander Kennedy Papers*, *Captain William Kennedy Correspondence*, *Eleanor E. Kennedy Papers* and *Mary Kennedy Papers*. Secondary sources which provide information on Kennedy's arctic voyage include: W. Kennedy's, *Short Narrative of the Second Voyage of the Prince Albert* (London: Dalton, 1853); J. Lemer (ed.), *Memoirs of Lt. J.R. Bellot* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1855) and N. Wright's, *Quest for Franklin* (London: Heinemann, 1959).

Credits

The cover photograph of William Kennedy is printed courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

CAPTAIN WILLIAM KENNEDY
(1814 - 1890)

This house was built in 1866 by Captain William Kennedy, Arctic explorer and advocate of Canadian westward expansion.

Born at Cumberland House of a Cree Mother and Scottish Father, who was a Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, Kennedy was educated in the Orkneys and at 18 joined the Company as a trader. In 1846 he resigned from the Company in protest over its liquor trade and henceforth strongly opposed its monopoly in Rupertsland.

In 1851 he led the thirteenth search for the lost Arctic explorer, Sir John Franklin. Although unsuccessful it added to the knowledge of the Canadian Arctic. Kennedy was untiring in his efforts to promote the annexation of Rupertsland by Canada and was an early advocate of a railway to Hudson Bay.

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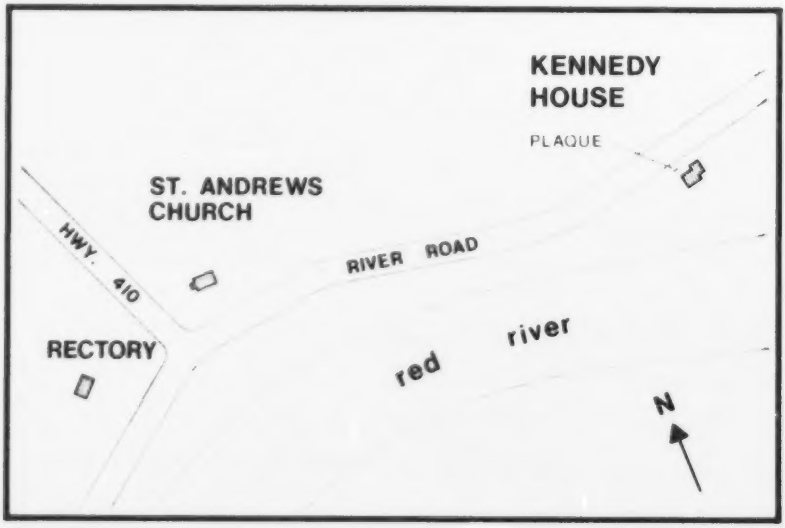

This plaque is located on the grounds of the Kennedy House, on River Road, in St. Andrew's Parish.